DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 221 950 EA 015 077

TITLE	Research and Development Exchange: The Challenge, the Response, and the Accomplishments of an NIE School Improvement Program.
INSTITUTION	Research and Development Exchange.
SPONS AGENCY	National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	Dec 81
NOTE	16p.
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Educational Improvement; Educational Research; Information Centers; *Information Dissemination; Information Networks; National Programs; *Regional Laboratories; *Research and Development Centers; Research Utilization; State Departments of Education; Technical Assistance
IDENTIFIERS	*Research and Development Exchange

ABSTRACT

To further the National Institute of Education's goal of ensuring a coordinated and nationally linked outreach capability for providing schools with the knowledge and services generated through research and development (R&D), the nation's R&D centers developed an interorganizational and collaborative school improvement program known as the Research and Development Exchange (RDx). Composed of eight regional exchanges (each representing several R&D laboratories and university-based centers), four central services, and a coordinating committee, the RDx has four major goals: to provide information, technical assistance, and training for school improvement programs; to promote the use of R&D outcomes; to promote coordination among dissemination and school improvement programs; and to increase shared understanding and use of information about client needs in order to influence future R&D efforts. In addition to describing the RDx mission and basic structure, this document briefly highlights two areas in which the RDx has achieved significant success: working with state departments of education in the design, development, and implementation of state-wide school improvement programs; and disseminating and promoting the use of R&D outcomes as they support local, state, and regional school improvement initiatives. (Author/PGD)

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This report is prepared by members of the Research and Development Exchange (RDx). The RDx is funded by the National Institute of Education, Department of Education. Opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the National Institute of Education, and no official endorsement should be inferred.

THE CHALLENGE

For the last decade, schools have been faced with problems which threaten their very existence. Declining enrollment, deteriorating student achievement scores, violence and vandalism are but a few of the problems plaguing the nation's schools. In the past, the response to such crises has been to allocate additional funds to schools through reform and innovative programs. But times have changed. In these austere times, the general public is reluctant to expend more and more resources in education arguing that problems facing schools cannot be remedied simply with funds. Schools must make do with what they have and devise more efficient and effective ways to meet their problems.

It is pointed out that past investments in education in the form of support for new ideas and programs have yielded a wealth of knowledge which must now be channeled directly to the improvement of school practices. One of the major sources of that knowledge base is educational R&D. Over the past two decades, R&D has developed an impressive array of products and programs with trained personnel and know-how. It is argued that this rich resource must be mobilized and targeted to address problems in the schools. Thus, dissemination of knowledge and technical assistance to schools to solve problems became a key school improvement strategy.

As major R&D producers, the educational R&D laboratories and university based centers offer an existing network which can share the responsibility and the challenge of school improvement. This network has had a history of

commitment in school improvement, dating back to the mid-sixties when they were created under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Geographically, it is a nation-wide network covering nearly all the states in the union. Finally, it has the necessary expertise and linkages with research as well as with practice.

In 1976, the National Institute of Education began planning for a major school improvement effort involving the participation of educational R&D laboratories and university-based centers. The intent was to ensure a coordinated and nationally-linked outreach capability in providing R&D based knowledge and services to the schools. The challenge to labs and centers is to gain deeper understanding of schools' needs, constraints, and problem-solving processes, transform, synthesize, and adapt what is known, deliver the appropriate R&D knowledge base, and assist schools in implementing solutions to problems.

THE RESPONSE

Working closely with NIE, the network of labs and centers developed and operated an interorganizational and collaborative school improvement program known collectively as the Research and Development Exchange (RDx). Its goals are:

1. The RDx will provide information, technical assistance, and/or training which support dissemination and school improvement efforts.
2. The RDx will promote the use of R&D outcomes that support dissemination and school improvement efforts.
3. The RDx will promote coordination among dissemination and school improvement programs.
4. The RDx will increase shared understanding and use of information about client needs in order to influence planning of R&D efforts.

Structurally, the RDx consists of eight Regional Exchanges, four Central Services, and a coordinating committee.

Regional Exchanges

Each Regional Exchange delivers services to clients within an identified geographic region of the country. Each Regional Exchange operates with an advisory committee of representatives from educational agencies in its region. The Regional Exchanges and the regions they serve are:

AEL: Charleston, West Virginia

Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia

CEMREL: St. Louis, Missouri

Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, Tennessee, Wisconsin

McREL: Kansas City, Missouri

Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming

NEREX: Chelmsford, Massachusetts

Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island, Vermont

NWREL: Portland, Oregon

Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Washington

RBS: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania

SEDL: Austin, Texas

Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas

SWRL: Los Alamitos, California

Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah

Central Support Services

The RDx central support services provide resource support for the Regional Exchanges. The four central support services are:

DISSEMINATION SUPPORT SERVICES (DSS)

Provides training and consultation in the design and delivery of staff development and dissemination services. DSS is a program of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Portland, Oregon.

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT INTERPRETATION SERVICE (RDIS)

Synthesizes R&D outcomes and assists educational practitioners in utilizing this R&D-based knowledge in their dissemination and school imnprovement efforts. RDIS is a program of CEMREL, Inc., St. Louis, Missouri.

RESOURCE AND REFERRAL SERVICE (RRS)

Maintains a data base of individuals and organizations that produce, are knowledgeable about, or disseminate R&D outcomes. RRS is a program of the National Center for Research in Vocational Education, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.

SYSTEM SUPPORT SERVICE (SSS)

Coordinates RDx operations including the Coordinating Committee, and offers support services in documenting RDx operations and in facilitating communications among RDx participants. SSS is a program of the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, San Francisco, California.

Coordinating Committee

The RDx Coordinating Committee is composed of the directors of each Regional Exchange and Central Service. The Committee works closely with NIE to develop and implement RDx policies and practices, and plans and implements collaborative activities across the network. It meets several times a year, and operates with a number of ad hoc and standing task forces.

THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

It would be difficult to describe in a few pages all of the accomplishments of RDx over its four-year history. Highlights of two areas of RDx accomplishments are offered to provide the reader with a small sampling of accomplishments. These areas are: RDx work with state departments of education; and RDx role in disseminating and promoting the use of R&D outcomes as they support local, state, and regional school improvement initiatives. Even with these two areas, space does not permit a full description of accomplishments on the part of all of the members of RDx in all of the states RDx works in. Thus, only illustrative cases are offered and no attempt is made to describe work of all the members of RDx in these two areas.

Working with State Departments of Education

Increasingly, State Education Agencies (SEA) have taken prominent roles in the design, development, and implementation of school improvement programs. Since the inception of the RDx, it has been recognized that SEAs are the primary, though not the only, client group on whose behalf RDx resources can best be leveraged to affect school improvement. Thus, SEA input and participation in the RDx is paramount. Each of the Regional Exchanges operates with a regional advisory group which consists of representatives (usually appointed by the chief state school officer) from each SEA and other educational agencies in the region. These advisory groups perform many functions. They submit state needs for Exchange consideration; they review Exchange plans; and they advise Exchanges on setting priorities for services that are responsive to state needs. In addition to participation in advisory capacities, SEA representatives work closely with Exchanges to design, develop and implement state-wide school improvement programs. This relationship with SEAs takes

several forms. In some cases, Exchange staff take on short-term studies on behalf of SEAs. The topics of these studies are negotiated between an Exchange and an SEA in order that the findings are both timely and beneficial to the SEA school improvement agenda. In other cases, Exchange staff conduct staff development workshops for SEAs, ISAs, and LEAs on topics of high priority for SEAs. Finally, Exchanges offer long-term assistance to SEAs in the form of design of state-wide school improvement plans, analysis and synthesis of available resources in topical areas, and piloting of state improvement plans with selected LEAs. In all these instances, RDx has offered its R&D knowledge base and personnel to work collaboratively with SEAs on their school improvement agendas. Over time, a partnership in school improvement has developed between SEAs and the RDx. Such a partnership has mutual benefits. SEAs can now draw upon the resources of the RDx to help their school improvement activities; RDx, on the other hand, is able to gain deeper understandings of state and regional needs which can shape the development of R&D services and programs.

Since 1977, the RBS Exchange has been working closely with the Pennsylvania Department of Education on its competency-based education program (Project 81). In 1979, a new Secretary of Education was appointed. At that time, the new administration set the goal of reviewing existing state policies, programs, and structures to devise more effective ways of integrating Pennsylvania's school improvement activities. Staff from the RBS Exchange Exchange were invited by the new secretary to take part in the department-wide School Improvement Task Force in designing a 5-year Pennsylvania School Improvement Program. Through this task force and subsequent subcommittees, RBS staff played a direct role in assisting in the design and implementation of the Pennsylvania program. Specifically, RBS Exchange staff assisted in developing a conceptual framework for school improvement, revised long-range planning requirements, designed

and conducted training for state department technical assistors, and developed a state-wide dissemination plan. In all these instances, the Exchange offered the experiences from other states as well as from the R&D knowledge base. Its contributions are reflected in the contents of state-wide planning documents as well as in the implementation of these plans at the local level.

Currently, Exchange activities in Pennsylvania are concentrated on consolidating the learnings from the first year of implementation of the Pennsylvania School Improvement Program. Specifically, Exchange activities are focused on two facets. First, Exchange staff are developing resources booklets which detail process options LEAs can take to systematically plan and implement school improvement activities along state guidelines. Three of the planning process booklets have been published by the SEA and disseminated to participating schools and technical assistance groups in the state. Secondly, Exchange staff are engaged in developing a technical assistance network within the state to support local improvement implementation.

Dissemination and Use of R&D Outcomes

Collectively, the RDx has ready access to the R&D knowledge base accumulated through the years by its host institutions of labs and centers and their university affiliates. R&D resources are shared and collaborative dissemination and technical assistance efforts are planned and conducted among RDx participants. In addition, through the Resource and Referral Service of RDx, the network has information access to over 1,000 professional organizations, research firms, advocacy groups, and state and federal agencies working in education. Descriptions about these organizations are available in a computerized database which can be searched to learn of activities, products, and services provided by these organizations. Thus, through its own affiliation with R&D as well as its information outreach to other organizations and networks, the RDx has

developed and maintained an R&D knowledge base which can be mobilized to offer services to its clients.

One of the RDx service areas is the teaching of basic skills, which has become a recent priority in the nation's schools. Through its RDIS, RDx has prepared syntheses and interpretations of what research can offer to improve the teaching of basic skills. Panels of teachers and educators have been convened to elicit concerns and questions they have in the teaching of reading, math, and oral and written communication. These concerns and questions are then posed to panels of distinguished researchers in the respective areas. Collectively, the research panels offer their solutions or answers drawing from their research experiences and knowledge. Syntheses of these exchanges are prepared. Currently, the RDx has completed its synthesis work in reading and elementary math. It is proceeding with the development of comparable synthesis work in secondary math, and oral and written communication. Through these publications, the concerns of teachers and administrators are expressed and answered directly from what is known from research.

While these synthesis products are valuable resources, they must reach the hands of teachers and administrators who can use the information in them to plan programs and improve their teaching practices. The RDx, through its Regional Exchanges, has taken on the task of disseminating these synthesis products and providing technical assistance to curriculum directors, building principals, and teachers throughout the states. The delivery of this knowledge base is done in a variety of ways. Copies are made available for purchase, complimentary copies are sent to appropriate teacher trainers and curriculum directors in the states, and numerous state and regional workshops have been sponsored by the RDx. Research Within Reach -- A Research-Based Response to Concerns of Reading Educators was the first of several synthesis

products developed by the Research and Development Interpretation Service (RDIS) of RDx. Since its publication in November, 1978, each of the Exchanges in the RDx network has developed strategies to disseminate the product to its clients in the region. In the SEDL region, for example, staff from the Exchange disseminated the product in a number of ways. A regional conference was held and attended by reading specialists and Right-to-Read coordinators from the SEDL states. Follow-up workshops requested by participants from the regional conference were conducted for the Texas Education Agency in Austin; St. Martin Parish in Louisiana; and San Diego, Texas. Finally, direct mail copies were sent to reading and language arts specialists at the SEA, ISA, LEA, and IHE levels, including bulk mail of copies on request. In a case study on the dissemination and use of the reading product undertaken by RDIS, SSS, and SEDL-Rx, it was found that the product was used in a number of ways; the most prominent use was in the design of inservice activities by those SEA and ISA staff who have staff development responsiblities. Workshop or conference mode was found to be the most effective dissemination strategy. Finally, practitioners appreciated and valued research information presented in clear and readable language, and packaged in short and easy-to-use format.

The improvement of basic skills through effective classroom and instructional management techniques formed the theme of staff development workshops for many Regional Exchanges. At the AEL Exchange, staff planned a series of three workshops with its advisory group around that theme. The first workshop, held in Montgomery, Alabama, and co-hosted by AEL and the Alabama SEA, offered an overview of four R&D approaches to effective classroom management. The workshop, attended by SEA and LEA staff from the AEL region, was followed by two staff development workshops at Nashville, Tennessee, and Columbus, Ohio. Each of these workshops was co-hosted by AEL and the respective

SEA. The workshops featured intensive follow-ups of selected approaches from the Montgomery workshop. These events have since sparked interest in SEAs, witness several replications of workshops by SEAs in the AEL region designed for their own SEA and LEA staff, e.g., Alabama, North Carolina, West Virginia, and Florida. Furthermore, evaluation of AEL's staff development workshops indicate that participants valued the workshop experience, but more importantly, they would disseminate information from workshops to their colleagues and use workshop learnings in their own staff development activities.

Thus, current research and R&D practices are reaching practitioners through the efforts of the RDx network.

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